

PAUL L. GASTON

Ten Lessons for Liberal Education

Regarding the Higher Education Act Reauthorization

The debate over reauthorization of the Higher Education Act sounds a not-so-distant early warning for liberal education

WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION NOW JUST MONTHS AWAY, there is one college that enjoys the unwavering commitment of the Congress. Its name: Electoral.

Still, as political affairs have claimed a steadily increasing share of attention on the Hill, another crucial issue has received attention, the eighth reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA).

Since the adoption of the HEA in 1965, the stakes of reauthorization discussions have always been high. Because the HEA directs federal student aid, its influence on what have been dubbed the “three A’s” (access, affordability, and accountability) is considerable. From this influence arises a signal opportunity

for political positioning. This time, moreover, we have seen a familiar axiom confirmed, in that legislators with little additional funding to allocate compensate by proposing more intrusive policies.

Given their engagement with every sector of higher education, those who support liberal education for all students have a clear stake in the outcome of the reauthorization discussions. But as influential as the reauthorization may prove, what educators can learn from the discussion may prove in the long run to be even more important.

There are three reasons why. The issues that have surfaced in the HEA debate will persist long after reauthorization. Their recognition now can weigh against a risky decline in attentiveness that typically follows reauthorization. And, most to the point, there is much that can be done.

For the sake of convenience, call it a “top ten” of lessons for higher education—and for liberal education in particular. Because a popular late-night host begins with number ten and works his way down, we will, too. But we can improve on network television by going beyond the issues to consider ways in which liberal education might respond.

Issue 10: The voice of the liberally educated is not being heard.

Although most members of Congress benefited from a liberal education, the debate over the HEA has not elicited voiced appreciation for its values. Even advocates for higher education address almost exclusively its economic advantages for both individuals and the nation.

What can liberal education do? Legislators are largely the alumni of institutions committed to the values of a liberal education. Hence colleges and universities bear a shared responsibility for their continued liberal education. Through

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thoughtfully planned visits with legislators and development of targeted briefings, college and university representatives can “lobby” for institutional values in ways consistent with their educational mission. (How many institutions provide legislators with subscriptions to this journal?)

Issue 9: Assumptions regarding “transferability” threaten liberal education.

Coherent liberal education programs embody choices that distinguish institutions and their graduates. Some offer a required, highly distinctive core. Others require that each student plan an individual program in consultation with an advisor. Others insist on competence in a second language, prescribe a “capstone” experience in the final semester, or stipulate hands-on experience with a fine art. Efforts to facilitate the transfer of credits from one institution to another may be laudable, but federal and state legislation too often embodies the assumption that general education programs are (and indeed should be) more or less indistinguishable.

What can liberal education do? An electorate invested in economic, social, and political differentiation should understand clearly what would be sacrificed through the leveling of higher education. Hence, colleges and universities should develop lucid explanations of the choices embedded in their general education programs. Why is a second language essential for all students? What does a “capstone” accomplish? What rationale justifies the core? What kinds of learning are uniquely accessible through doing art? Even as institutions aggressively remove arbitrary impediments to the transfer of credits, they must continue to speak for students who choose a liberal arts education that is distinctive, perhaps even inimitable.

Issue 8: Higher education must pay close attention to K-12 reform efforts.

Discussion of the HEA has revealed the assumption that much of what seems good for the K-12 goose may be appropriate for the higher education gander. This appears most clearly in White House efforts to shape the HEA to reflect the K-12 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.

At least two fundamental concerns arise from this logical leap. First, the NCLB assumption

that schools should be measured by the performance of students on standardized achievement tests, irrespective of demographic or mission driven differentials, could be brought to bear on the evaluation of colleges and universities. Second, the commitment to new models of teacher education “based on the best alternative route programs of today” encouraged by Education Secretary Rod Paige threatens the assumption that potential teachers in particular should receive the advantages of a liberal arts education.

What can liberal education do? We can seek to assure that legislators recognize questionable assumptions embedded in NCLB. In addition, we can clarify the disadvantages to students in evaluative approaches that dismiss differences in institutional mission. We can also articulate more clearly the value for students of the professional education future teachers receive.

Above all, by documenting transformations in colleges and universities, we should remind legislators that higher education has undertaken reforms of its own. We should also celebrate reforms pursued by our K-12 colleagues and continue to develop partnerships with them even as we clarify the distinctive capacities of higher education.

Issue 7: Misunderstandings of accreditation could prove costly.

If the Congress fails to appreciate the strength within the American tradition of decentralized peer evaluation, much mischief may result. As Peter McGrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges has observed, “My European and Russian friends look with envy on our system of relative discretion, monitored by self-regulation and disclosure.”

Particularly vulnerable to ill-informed criticism may be the “alternate” processes of some regional accreditors. To a casual observer, these processes may appear less exacting than voluminous self-studies and expensive campus visits by large review teams. Yet, by requiring the documentation of continuous academic improvement, such processes are closer to the spirit of accountability that Congress avows. And they are of particular value to supporters of liberal education through their commitment to the documentation of holistic educational gains.

What can liberal education do? We can become familiar with the efforts of the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) to defend the values of “our system of relative discretion,” and we can help to educate legislators, at both state and federal levels.

Similarly, we can support accrediting associations in their shift from “inputs” (volumes in the library, number of faculty, and so forth) to “outputs,” or results (for instance, success of graduates on certifying examinations or in seeking employment). Finally, we can make clear the high level of accountability colleges and universities already meet through internal program review, state-level guidance, and the oversight offered by boards of trustees.

Issue 6: Tuition scapegoats may find themselves driven into the darkness.

Indictments of public higher education seldom acknowledge the principal culprit: sharp reductions in state aid. Private institutions, similarly, have been indicted for tuition policies dictated in part by the lagging student aid and inflationary pressures not within their control. The proposal by Rep. Howard “Buck” McKeon to strip student aid from institutions

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that violate limits on tuition increases confirms the impression that federal legislators expect colleges and universities somehow to absorb the effects of stagnant student aid levels, inflationary pressures such as health care, and the actions of their statehouse colleagues.

What can higher education do?

Some describe the McKeon bill as a form of “price control.” We can make that clear. We can make clear also how higher education’s efforts at cost-cutting have ameliorated the effects of inflation and reductions in support. Above all, we must do a better job of explaining the return on investment in higher education, private and public, both for states and for individuals, even when tuitions must increase. And as we support efforts by national higher education associations to promote significantly expanded aid to students, we can address public misconceptions that compound the problem. Many of those planning for higher education assume that the costs are higher than they are.

Issue 5: Just about everyone has a stake in higher education.

The good news expressed in AAC&U’s *Greater Expectations* is that a nation is going to college, and higher education’s response to an



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unprecedented expansion is a success story worth telling. Yet if higher education were not so important to so many, colleges and universities might not find themselves challenged so directly on so many fronts.

What can liberal education do? We should document how readily higher education has responded to the increased demands placed on it. And as we continue to assert the importance of a liberal education for all students, we can clarify also the distinct roles played by the different sectors of the higher education community. For example, we can honor the accomplishments and the expanding capacities of community colleges, even as we defend more vigorously the values many students find in traditional, campus-based educational experiences.

A powerful response to legislative concerns may lie in our developing more robust alliances joining segments of the educational continuum. The AAC&U membership rolls offer one such example at the institutional level, but this commitment should appear on every level. Faculty members should expand opportunities for research and pedagogical re-

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form through collaboration with colleagues at nearby institutions; students of accredited institutions should take advantage of cross-registration opportunities afforded by consortia and alliances; and colleges and universities should

explore opportunities for collaborative effectiveness and efficiency.

Issue 4: Few seem to be smiling because of the “public happiness.”

Thomas Jefferson wisely grounded the creation of the University of Virginia on the premise that higher education would enhance the “public happiness,” i.e., the public welfare. Because today’s debates on higher education emphasize benefits and costs for individuals with little attention given to broader advantages for society, it is becoming increasingly difficult to win public support for “educating other people’s kids.” This lack of public support discourages private support for scholarship assistance in private and public institutions alike and bodes ill for public higher education’s capacity to meet its current financial challenges.

What can liberal education do? Colleges and universities can disseminate research that demonstrates the economic, social, and ethical values served by institutions offering a liberal education to their students. Further, we can exploit opportunities to expand the community outreach of colleges and universities through panels, cultural events, and publications, a legacy of the land-grant tradition now as characteristic of private as of public institutions.

Issue 3: Research is widely misunderstood and underappreciated.

The spirit of Senator Proxmire’s “Golden Fleece” competition, which ridiculed research deemed arcane, wasteful, or ill-judged, remains alive in the halls of Congress. Even the *Chronicle of Higher Education* refers in its headlines to “academic pork.”

What can liberal education do? We can articulate the practical value of research conducted by America’s colleges and universities and the role of such research in sustaining our competitiveness throughout the world. Indeed, we should protect opportunities to “tag” research results so that their implementation will reflect favorably on sponsoring institutions.



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But there is a balance to be struck by those committed to the values of liberal education. Even as we make clear the importance of technology transfer and product development, we must defend vigorously the vital importance of basic research, both for faculty and for students. Beyond the many tangible benefits that have emerged from work undertaken without explicit pragmatic ends in view, basic research offers an environment for creativity and disinterested investigation, without which discoveries likely to shape the future are unlikely to emerge.

Issue 2: Myths continue to inspire our critics.

"Universities operate far less efficiently than most businesses." "Faculty members are overpaid and under-worked." "General education is something to get out of the way." "Student athletes: an oxymoron." So say some legislators, and so think some people. Although these myths embody misunderstandings, inaccurate information, and, sometimes, willful antipathy, those who embrace them may regard higher education's answers as expressing self-interest.

What can liberal education do? We must identify the myths that shape opinion, take them seriously, and mount credible efforts to defeat them in the public mind. Our students, their families, and shapers of opinion must be led to understand not just issues such as faculty workload, how students spend their time, and how resourceful and efficient colleges and universities have become, but also the role that liberal education plays in shaping the educated citizen.

Of course, associations such as AAC&U have for a long time contributed to this effort. We should support their continued engagement through our memberships and participation. In addition, we should encourage advocates among journalists, corporate leaders,

and legislators by making available to them the information they need when they need it.

Issue 1: These issues will not go away, and they are not the only issues.

With other concerns (Iraq, the deficit, the election, and so on) more conspicuous, reauthorization of the HEA has not become the most highly visible legislative priority. That may be just as well, as increased visibility would doubtless reflect increased partisanship. But the issues for higher education, and for liberal education in particular, are likely to remain with us.

And the list offered here is far from complete. For instance, the complex issue of federal student aid, which lies at the core of the HEA, has obvious importance to liberal educators, for allocations decisions can have a profound impact on the growth of higher education's different sectors. Similarly, the continued proliferation of compliance requirements will require reallocation of assets that might otherwise support freshman seminars, undergraduate research, or curricular reform.

What can liberal education do? Without becoming melodramatic, we should continue to make the case that the future of the nation is closely tied to a vigorous, independent, differentiated, integrated, and well-supported system of higher education. Political leaders who understand the public, as well as the private, value of higher education, should earn our bipartisan support. And we should not forget that any opportunity to educate with regard to the values of higher education is an opportunity to express ever more clearly the advantages that a liberal education confers. □

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